

**Sacred Waters: An International and Transdisciplinary Conference**  
**Buxton, England 30 June – 3 July, 2024**

**30 June, 6PM**

**Keynote and Reception with light supper Pump Room, The Crescent beside St. Ann's Well**

**The Dorset Otter-Dragon: Water Beings, Art and Agency in the Stour River Valley**  
**Veronica Strang, Oxford University**

Religious history is often described as a palimpsest in which, over time, people re-imagine previous beliefs and practices to reflect contemporary priorities. While early human communities venerated water deities manifesting the agency of water, and sought egalitarian partnerships with the non-human domain, societies developing greater instrumental control over the material world changed their religious ideas accordingly. Many water deities were semi-humanised or replaced by humanised gods who appropriated their powers and demonised any serpentine deities that threatened their dominion. But coercive control over 'nature' has led to a global environmental crisis, and it is plain that more sustainable human-environmental relations can only be re-established by recognising and respecting the co-creative agency of non-human beings and ecosystems. In trying to achieve this, environmental activists have been inspired by indigenous communities, who often deploy their traditional water beings to articulate alternate ideas and values. Contemporary campaigners are also reaching into their own religious pasts, and ancient beliefs about water beings, to challenge anthropocentric utilitarianism. This lecture explores just such an endeavour: an attempt to express the creative powers of water in the form of the Dorset Otter-Dragon, created by artist Sasha Constable for a May Day Festival in the Stour River Valley.

**1 July, 8:15AM**

**Venue opens and Welcome**  
**Assembly Room, The Crescent**

**Session I: Sacred Topographies, Trees & Stones**

**8:30 – The 'Well of Magic Waters, and the Dead Tree': Healing on Isle Maree**  
**Ceri Houlbrook, University of Hertfordshire, England**

'There, in a little clearing of the wood, we found what we had come to see – the stones of the Dead Lovers, the site of the Hermit's Cell, the Well of Magic Waters, and the Dead Tree'. This fantastical description was penned by historian and topographer Rev. Thomas Ratcliffe Barnett in 1930. It described his visit to Isle Maree in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland, a site that had long held associations with healing. Complex and often cruel rituals surrounding the water of both Loch Maree and the island's 'holy well' are documented in nineteenth-century sources, specifically in relation to cases of 'lunacy', and what they describe is a microcosm of popular beliefs concerning curative rites and sites. This paper will draw on Isle Maree as a micro-historic case-study to explore wider British and Irish late-modern traditions of health and healing.

**8:45 – Wishing Stones, Blood-Tipped Grass, and Saint’s Hair: Healing, Pilgrimage and the Natural World at St Winefride’s Well**  
**Kathryn Hurlock, Manchester Metropolitan University, England**

Since the seventh century, St Winefride’s Well in North Wales has been famed for its healing waters. However, the well and its sacred landscape have a range of other natural attractions associated with the saint, pilgrimage, and healing which have placed a part in the rituals of pilgrims, and their healing. These range from the stone associated with St Winefride’s uncle and confessor, St Beuno, to the trees above the valley, and the moss known as St Winefride’s hair which once grew in the well itself. These have been incorporated into both Christian and folk practices over the course of the well’s history. This paper considers how St. Winefride Well, and its associated trees, rocks, plants and sacred topographies were integrated into the pilgrimage experience, how pilgrims reconciled these things with hagiographical stories of the early Middle Ages, and what that tells us about the role of these objects in healing and pilgrimage. This paper draws on research for a monograph analysing the performance of pilgrimage to St Winefride’s Well from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, due for publication in 2025.

**9:00 – The Sacred Waters of Osun River**  
**Oyewale Peter Oluwaseun, Ekiti State University, Nigeria**

This paper interprets the sacred waters of Osun River in Osogbo capital of Osun State, Nigeria through a multidimensional lens. This study employs oral interviews and leverages secondary sources to delve into artifacts, ritual objects, wood carvings, and pottery associated with the river’s sacrality. The paper references annual pilgrimage traditions when devotees converge in the city of Osogbo, typically in August each year, to celebrate and partake in the sacred rituals of Osun Osogbo festival. The study traverses the sacred topographies and associated saint cults known as Yeye Osun “Osun’s Mother” and the Arugba known as the “Bearers of the calabash.” The study will also examine the profound traditions rooted in the belief that the deity, Osun, grants requests and abundantly blesses worshippers. Recognized as the Ile-Aje “House of Riches,” Osun Osogbo holds a pivotal role in fulfilling desires, including the blessing of fertility, granting children to barren women. Osun Osogbo river emerges as a nexus of social relations between humans and non-human entities including associated trees (remnants of Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove) and rocks. This study aims to contribute to a holistic understanding of Osun Osogbo River, providing insights into its archaeological roots, therapeutic significance, cultural histories, and the interconnected web of human-nature relationships.

**9:15 – Shared topographies, entangled beliefs: Sacred springs as part of a complex of revered sites in Southwest Finland**

**John Björkman, Åbo Akademi University, Finland**

Field visits to sacred springs in southwest Finland often reveals a richer topography of outstanding terrain features than the recorded lore about them would suggest. For example, hills with imposing cliffsides and solitary erratic boulders are often encountered in the vicinity of a sacred spring. Similar terrain features, as well as springs, are often found at other types of

revered sites as well, such as sites known to be inhabited by devils, ghosts or local spirits. When viewed within a broader context of revered sites of vernacular belief, it seems that the sacred springs of southwest Finland refuse to stay within the confines of “sacred springs” as a defined type, but rather seem to be entangled with other types of sacred sites, which all share similar topographic features. Are sacred springs part of a broader complex of revered supernatural sites? Observations in the field can reveal very different divisions and typologies than literary or archival sources.

#### **9:30 – 9:40 Session 1 Q & A**

#### **Session 2: Mapping and Historicizing Sacred Waters and their Hydrogeological Contexts**

##### **9:45 – Mapping Saints: Holy Wells in Sweden and Finland from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era**

**Terese Zachrisson, University of Gothenburg, Sweden**

The project group “Mapping Lived Religion,” a 5-year digital history project funded by the Swedish Research Council, is currently building a public map database on the cult of saints in the Swedish Church Province. The online resource will be officially launched in August 2024. The database gathers evidence of saints’ cults through a plethora of different phenomena, including feast days, shrines, miracle stories, images, oral traditions and landscape formations. We currently have more than 9000 “cult manifestations” registered in the database. During this presentation, the public interface “Mapping Saints” will be demonstrated with a particular focus on holy wells and springs from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era, looking at their geographical spread, patron saints and the various devotional practices connected to them. The presentation will also include a discussion about the challenges presented by the task of translating the lived religious experiences of the past into binary code.

##### **10:00 – Historicising the Veneration of Water Bodies among the Igbomina of North-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria**

**Adeniyi Justus Aboyeji, University of Ilorin, Nigeria**

The spirituality of water, apparently, is a common denominator among religions. Despite increasing studies on sacred water bodies in Yorùbáland, little attention, if any, has been paid to the nature and socio-religious contexts responsible for the veneration of water bodies among the Igbomina of north-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria. The essence of this study, therefore, is to put the veneration of water bodies among the Igbomina in proper historical trajectory. The study adopts a trans-disciplinary methodology, exploring historical, archaeological and geographical as well as primary and secondary source materials for analytical enquiry and content analysis. Findings reveal that the Igbomina have a rich ancient tradition and history of venerating water bodies such as rivers, streams and waterfalls, including: Ayikunugba, Ijoko and Owu waterfalls; Rivers Ayaba, Ogun, Adu, Eleyo in Iwo; Aran, Mojemu, Awere in Owu; Orisa in Ola; Oko at Irabon; Osin in Ila area, and Oyi, which is believed to encircle Igbominaland. These bodies of water were mostly venerated, not necessarily worshipped, for different reasons. The paper concludes that water bodies played significant roles in Igbomina culture, shaping their spiritual and socio-economic base.

**10:15 – On Water Burials in Old Lithuanian Tradition**  
**Vykintas Vaitkevicius, Klaipeda University, Lithuania**

In 1983, the first Lithuanian burial site of the cremated dead from the 13th-14th centuries was found in Lake Obeliai. In 2006, investigations began at the Bajorai burial site near Elektrėnai, where the remains of the cremated dead, ashes and fragments of grave-goods from the same period were drowned in the small Lake Briaunius, which connects with Lake Švenčius (< šventas 'holy'). Finally, in 2009, a 14th-century burial site in a former stream bed was also discovered in the historic capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Kernavė. The unique discoveries provide ample stimulus for developing discussion on water burial. In our case, it is important to emphasise that the archaeological nomenclature separating burial from sacred natural sites needs to be adjusted, as water burials combine these two types of monuments. Secondly, although burial rites have changed over time, the importance of the site has remained remarkable over almost two thousand years (in the 14th c., burials at Bajorai were made in the same place where also graves of the 5th c. BC were found). One more, but not the last, point to note: the bodies of the deceased were given to the fire before being buried in water. This distinctive rite has ancient roots and may be considered a legacy of Indo-European mythology.

**10:30 – 10:45 \*\*Tea/Coffee Break\*\***

**10:45 – Evolution and Significance of Water Springs in the Ancient World: A Study**  
**Considering Tourism**

**Janis Bikse, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Latvia**

**G. Mahendar Reddy, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Latvia/National Institute of**  
**Tourism & Hospitality Management Hyderabad, India**

Water springs played a significant and multifaceted role in the development of ancient civilizations across various regions. Integral connections between ancient civilizations and water sources were essential for agricultural advancements, hygiene, health and wellness, cultural significance, architectural aspects, urban planning and engineering feats. However, studies on the knowledge and evolution of human engagement with springs in the context of leisure, recreation and tourism are scarce. Our study is aimed at exploring the ancient knowledge and evolution of spring use from the wellness and tourism perspective. Outcomes of the study contribute to understanding the sustainability concerns around springs and the role of sustainable tourism.

**11:00 – The Hydrogeological Settings and Groundwater Characteristics of Sacred Wells in**  
**Ireland**

**Bruce Misstear, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland**

The hydrogeological settings of Irish holy wells were initially investigated using Geographical Information Systems, followed by detailed field surveys. These showed that holy wells are found in all of the main lithologies and aquifer categories in the country. Water samples were collected from 167 of these wells and analysed for a wide range of chemical parameters, including major and minor ions and trace elements. The results were generally as anticipated with, for example, harder waters in limestones than in other lithologies, and more mineralised

waters near the coast compared to inland areas. Detailed statistical analyses were undertaken to see if there were associations between the individual chemical constituents and their potential health benefits. In most cases, the tests did not demonstrate any linkages between the reputed cure for wells and their water chemistry. An interesting exception was for sodium and chloride, where values in wells with reputations for eye cures were somewhat higher than for the other wells. A possible explanation for the elevated salt content is that such eye wells were more commonly found in coastal areas.

#### **11:15-11:25 – Session 2 Q & A**

#### **Session 3: Personhood and Water Beings**

##### **11:30 – Personhood of Water in Prehistoric Times and Beyond**

**Christina Fredengren, Stockholm University/Uppsala University, Sweden**

There is plentiful evidence in medieval place-lore to suggest that waters were observed as being alive, as more-than-human persons who could have received depositions as gifts. This paper builds on two of my earlier papers (Fredengren 2016 & 2018) and explore how depositions of both wealth and body parts in water may have added to understandings of waters as having a personhood. With examples from Scandinavia and Ireland I will start a discussion on the personhood of waters and the possible historic/prehistoric understanding of waters as sentient.

##### **11:45 – Awakened Waters: Animals, Ritual, and Power in the Sundarbans**

**Calynn Dowler, Vanderbilt University, U.S.**

This paper explores changing relationships with sacred (“awakened” or jagroto) water bodies in the Sundarbans delta of West Bengal, India. It is based on ethnographic research with Hindu, Muslim, and Christian fishers and farmers. The first part of the paper explores the forms of ecological thought and practice that have emerged in this setting over time, reflected in stories and rituals relating to water beings and aquatic animals such as crocodiles, fish, and tortoises. As human settlement of the delta has increased, sacred water bodies have increasingly been transformed into private commercial fisheries, limiting access and leading to the replacement of indigenous aquatic animals with farmed fish varieties. These changes are experienced as spiritual loss, with many people claiming that water beings have departed local waters. At the same time, commercial fishery owners continue to maintain ritual relations with water beings. I therefore approach the transition toward commercial aquaculture not as a form of secular disenchantment, but as a cosmologically rich process mediated by engagements with water beings. By attending to these relations, I argue that we can better understand how new ethics of nature emerge and are contested.

##### **12:00 – ‘Water being and being Water’: Interrogating the place of ‘Ota’ Spring and Groove in Ikorodu, a coastal African community**

**Kolawole Charles Omotayo, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Nigeria**

In the coastal community of Ikorodu, Lagos, water bodies provide habitations for sacred presences within everyday life. This is especially true of the ‘Ota’ spring and groove dedicated to a water being known as ‘Ota’. As a place having a particular shape and ecology, the ‘Ota’

Spring and groove have complex sets of religious associations. The 'Ota' groove, located beside the 'Ota' spring is seen as a site of condensation of more dispersed religious realities, and as a place where meanings take on specific, tangible, and tactile presence. Based on field research, this paper interrogates how 'Ota' spring and groove in Ikorodu Community serve as the receptacle within the material world for what worshipers experience when they come into the presence of the 'water being' and manifest tendencies of 'being water'. Using ethnography, this project also examines how devotion to the 'water being' is deployed to keep the lived experiences of the people linking events, places and persons central to religious traditions.

#### **12:15 – Animistic Properties of Japanese Holy Spring Landscapes**

**Masaaki Okada, Kindai University, Osaka, Japan**

This study targeted 756 existing spring-water sites within Japan, revealing their roles as the sources for each settlement and forms of worship, and their connection to local industries. This work included folklore material surveys, landscape field surveys, and listening sessions with local people. Japan's land, rich in alluvial layers and abundant in high-quality groundwater, is dotted with many springs in mountain foothills and plains. Before the modern water-supply system was widespread, these springs were precious sources of drinking and domestic water, playing a crucial role in determining survival of local communities. Moreover, many springs have been deified due to the gratitude for clear water. Animistic beliefs characterize many sites. Additionally, high-quality water gave rise to characteristic traditional local industries oriented towards water use (such as papermaking and sake-brewing). Interestingly, papers and sake themselves manufactured using spring-water exhibit divine characteristics as well. Even in contemporary society, where they have lost their role as water sources, spring-water spaces continue to exist as sites for shrines or torii gates, serving as venues for festivals. This study manifested their role as vital regional resources that ensure sustainability of local communities and serve as spiritual anchors.

#### **12:30 – Frog Wells: A forgotten source of healing in a modern world?**

**Sarah Head, Independent Scholar, England**

Literature devoted to sacred waters rarely references frogs, but range from a Satanic well in Shropshire to a Japanese folk tale on world perception. Searching for "frogwells" across the British Isles shows large numbers. Why should that be? A study of herbal medicine using European sources and English folklore reveals a largely forgotten role for amphibians in the treatment of common conditions from nosebleeds to tuberculosis in humans and farm animals. Collecting both frog spawn and live animals would be key for any practicing apothecary working before the mid-nineteenth century, hence the large number of designated "frogwells" across the country. Even after the use of frogs ceased for treating human diseases, folk treatment for farm animals continued in communities lacking means or opportunity to access other veterinary treatments. Using frogs as an indicator for drinking water safety continued in rural Warwickshire until the 1960s. Modern literature indicates a negative relationship between frogs and holy wells. A more in-depth search reveals the intrinsic positive relationship between frogs, holy water and treatments for various conditions faced by humans and animals including identification of safe drinking water.

#### **12:45 – 12:55 Session 3 Q & A**

**\*\*1PM -2PM – Lunch\*\***

Those with a light blue dot on your name tags are registered for all lunches. Non-presenters with a day ticket including lunch have a yellow dot on your name tags.

**Session 4: Climate, Biocultural Diversity and Endangered Sacred Topographies**

**2:00 – Water, weather and winter: Activating and ritualizing growth forces in historic Scandinavia**

**Terje Oestigaard, Linnaeus University, Sweden**

In historic and ethnological sources up to the 19th century, apart from Christian uses of sacramental waters, there are few traces of holy water in rural and agrarian Scandinavia. Major parts of the ritual and seasonal year were structured around activating growth forces and the life-giving waters. While these waters represented immanent and embodied powers of the earth, wights and ancestral forces, there was also a constant fight between good and bad forces in the cosmos, and the main challenge was to survive and combat the hostile and cold winters. The main ritualisation aimed to secure continuity between the agricultural seasons and to incite the latent growth forces covered by snow and ice during the winter. In particular *frobrunnar* – wells that never froze during the winter – were underground sources enabling farmers to ritualise and activate the growth forces hiding under the snow. This water was not venerated in a Christian sense, but mainly ritualised and evoked through horse riding and fights, which also took the form of the summer conquering the winter. This points to the great time depth of these rituals, which clearly have pre-Christian roots.

**2:15 – Aquatic Sacred Natural Sites & Climate Change**

**Celeste Ray, Sewanee: The University of the South, U.S.**

Sacred watery sites known through archaeology, scriptures and Indigenous tradition are a category of the Sacred Natural Sites recognized by UNESCO and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Not surprisingly, Traditional Ecological Knowledge is attached to Aquatic Sacred Natural Sites around the globe, so that they can also be described as nodes of Biocultural Diversity where culture and biology are interrelated and even co-evolved. That is, where particular ecosystems inspire spiritual beliefs and practices—and these beliefs and practices help protect and maintain ecosystems, habitats, and stocks of particular flora and fauna. These most protected water sources are good indicators of local water health, yet can now be threatened by agricultural run-off and development. Knowledge about their use and ritual stewardship can help monitor effects of changing climate, and also model best practices to foster socioecological resilience through forecasted water crises.

**2:30 – A Sacred Spring and Medicinal Waters in the Southern Subplateau of the Iberian Peninsula: Possible Attribution to the Oretani and Mythical Topographies in Danger**

**Pedro R. Moya-Maleno, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain**

The Cabeza del Buey (Torre de Juan Abad, Ciudad Real, Spain) is a prominent mountain in the southern subplateau of the Iberian Peninsula with an Oretani Iberian hillfort on the top. Also present was a *Baño de la Mora* 'Moor's Bath', a spring with legends linked with the Beyond, which overlaps with the respect and fear that the inhabitants of the area had for this

mountain. So, it raises the dilemma about whether the spring was already attributed magical qualities in the Iron Age, or if, on the contrary, otherworldly attributes developed after the abandonment of the place. Today, water does not flow from this fountain, nor from other nearby medicinal baths, due to a persistent drought. Rural emigration also relegates the legends to folklore compilations. In the 21st century, to make matters worse, the discovery in the area of rare-earth minerals, the exploitation of which requires enormous amounts of water and earth movement, could mean the definitive disappearance of ancient mythical topographies.

**2:45 – Hetch Hetchy Valley and Biocultural Diversity: Value, Politics, and Environmental Justice**

**Russell C. Powell, Harvard University, U.S.**

This paper will explore Hetch Hetchy Valley as a site of biocultural diversity that provides insight into the evolution of environmentalist discourse in light of environmental justice concerns. In 1923, Hetch Hetchy Valley was inundated to provide nearby San Francisco with a more reliable freshwater source. In the one hundred years since Hetch Hetchy's flooding, environmentalists, following arguments first made in 1913 by John Muir, have called for the valley's restoration. Yet as controversies over water allotments from the San Joaquin Bay Delta have intensified under recent conditions of chronic drought, voters have decidedly rejected proposals to restore Hetch Hetchy. When the valley's reservoir supplies San Franciscans with access to the cleanest and most abundant water source in all of California, the city's Public Utilities Commission has argued, the prospect of the valley's restoration risks inducing an environmental justice crisis between those with access to alternative water sources and those without. In this way, Hetch Hetchy is a flashpoint in debates over the values that historically have motivated environmentalist concerns (especially debates over nature's intrinsic value and sacred standing). It is also an instructive site for understanding environmental politics as a social-ecological system, complex and adaptable within the functional boundaries of its cultural terrain.

**3:00-3:10 – Session 4 Q & A**

**Session 5: Sustainable Water Management, Intangible Culture and Resilience**

**3:15 – The Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature: Implications for management and governance of Water bodies and Wetlands.**

**Bas Verschuuren, Wageningen University, The Netherlands**

This talk explores the growing importance of the cultural and spiritual significance of nature in the international nature conservation movement with a focus on wetlands and water bodies. This significance aligns with societal and professional viewpoints on critical issues such as the adoption of rights-based conservation approaches, the recognition of rights for nature, efforts to decolonize conservation practices, and the expansion of diverse area-based conservation initiatives under target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework. Foremost, the global sacred dimensions of nature should cause us to question our relationship with our environments and other-than-human beings, including the spirit world. With current trends of nature spirituality and dark green religion, more and more individuals identify themselves as integral parts of



nature, bound to its wellbeing through spirituality. In the Anthropocene era, this shift in our relationship with nature will impact how we engage with, and make decisions regarding, conservation issues. By examining the sacred dimensions of nature, this presentation underscores insights gleaned from a diverse array of globally significant sacred natural water bodies, wetlands, and wells for revitalizing their conservation management and governance.

**3:30 – Indigenous Ecotheology and Sustainable Water Management: A Literature Review**

**Johannes M. Luetz, Alphacrucis University College; University of the Sunshine Coast;  
University of New South Wales, Australia**

Indigenous Peoples have lived sustainably through eco-theological traditions and practices. Scholars now advocate so-called reversals of learning whereby Indigenous and local communities “teach the profligate and so-called ‘developed’ rich about the interwoven nature of frugality, modesty, contentedness, spirituality and sustainability.” Although ecotheology has been discussed extensively in the context of major world religions; this paper contributes to studies of the relationships of religion, nature and environmental challenges in an Indigenous context. Using a systematic assessment of the peer-reviewed literature, this conceptual paper extends previous research by examining the affinities between Indigenous spirituality and sustainable water use, including in relation to sacred topographies, springs, pools, rivers, lagoons, and lakes, among others.

**\*\*3:45 – 4:00 \*\*Tea/Coffee Break\*\***

**4:00 Unveiling Sustainable Strategies from the Management of Sacred Waters in the Late  
Medieval South of Portugal**

**Rolando Volzone, Instituto de Estudos Medievais -FCSH NOVA, Portugal**

Due to the last century's transformation and the scarcity of historical records and studies, there is a very limited understanding of the landscape features related to the religious movements of the Late Middle Ages in the South of Portugal. This article sets out to address this research gap by combining methodologies from history, archaeology and ecology, in order to give the first steps towards the definition of this specific landscape and to unveil sustainable strategies in the management of water resources. By taking into account the interaction between religious men and their environment (through cultural and ecological components), this research identified four systems at the basis of the landscape: building, circulation, vegetation, and water. The study focuses on the last one, made of hydric (e.g., streams, rivers, springs) and hydraulic components (e.g., fountains, wells, reservoirs), through the integration of off-site (identification and analysis of primary sources, such as sale and donation charters, historical cartographies) and on-site surveys with traditional and digital technologies. The methodology is applied to the experience of the Portuguese eremitical congregation of São Paulo da Serra de Ossa in Alentejo region (southern of Portugal). First results show their responsible production and consumption of water resources.

**4:15 – Intangible Cultural Heritage as Ecological Activism at Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland**  
**Anjuli Grantham, Ulster University**

Lough Neagh, the largest freshwater body in Ireland, is toxic due to contamination and bacterial growth. This paper considers responses to ecological crises through a posthuman critical heritage studies lens, locating an ecocentric approach to heritage enacted within activist networks in Northern Ireland. Some “lough protectors” engage intangible cultural heritage as a fundamental attribute of their activism. From holding a wake to mourn the lough on its own shores, to harkening Li Ban (the lough’s supernatural being), lough protectors engage various Irish cultural and folkloric practices as acts of ecological care. These expressions of Irish heritage at times assert the animacy of Lough Neagh as a living, other-than-human entity and gesture towards reciprocal relations with other beings.

**4:30 – 4:40 – Session 5 Q & A**

**Venue closes at 5:15**

**\*\*Petaling for Buxton’s Annual Well Dressing takes place from 9AM to 6PM in St. John’s Church from July 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>. Conference participants are expected the afternoon of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, but visitors are welcome to watch, try a bit of petaling, and view an exhibition and short documentary about the tradition on any of those days.\*\***

**Guided Evening Tours of “The Buxton Experience”**

**6:30 PM** (if you chose this time, you have a green dot on your name tag)

**8:00 PM** (if you chose this time you have a navy or dark blue dot on your name tag)

\*If you indicated flexibility at registration as to tour time, you have a dark gray dot and may choose either time.

\*\*This tour is not included in the Day Ticket.

**2 July**

**Assembly Room, The Crescent**

**Session 6: Creative Responses to Sacred Waters**

**8:30 – Survey of Creative Literature on Holy Wells in the British Isles:  
A Theory on How the Literary Imagination Can Assist in Conservation Efforts**  
**Nichole Lariscy, University of Alabama at Birmingham, U.S.**

The holy wells of the British Isles have long figured prominently in poetry and narrative literature. A survey of the creative literature that references the holy wells of the British Isles illustrates key patterns in how they are understood and imagined through distinct time periods. Authors in this survey include, but are not limited to: W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge, Robert Southey, AE Russell, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Winston Graham, and Kate Horsley. Stories and metaphoric construction of the wells meet diverse cultural needs through changing historical time periods, locations of the wells, and the perspectives of readers and writers. Do the wells serve to provide sacred spaces, inspire,

comfort, heal, solidify identity, connect with nature, or other purposes? Additionally, theories about how reading narrative and poetry affect human behavior will be applied to the analysis of holy wells in the evolving literary imagination. Understanding how reading and writing about holy wells can help change human behavior facilitates an intentional utilization of this literature to aid in Environmental Humanities efforts to advocate for and assist in conservation.

**8:45 – Holy Wells as a Creative Source**

**Candice Ivy, Boston College, U.S,**

Paralleling internal and external landscapes, my mixed media sculptures (of clay, wood, and glass) explore water imagery from Irish and Scottish holy wells as a frequent creative source. This paper will start with two major works and their influences, but focus on subsequent projects and the research which has emerged more recently. *Deluge*, from 2015, is a twenty-foot tall cascade of black glass shown at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, its waterfall imagery suggests a torrential downpour and resonates with themes of transformation and renewal. *Hummm*, from 2020, is a ten by ten foot wood, glass, and ceramic work shown at the Fitchburg Art Museum. This piece holds the viewer in the dynamism of creation and destruction, suggesting an embodied force of the ‘feminine’ within sacred waters.

**9:00 – 9:10 Session 6 Q & A**

**Session 7: Politics, Hegemonies and Heterodoxies of Faith and Practice**

**9:15 – Sacred Waters of Setomaa, South-Eastern Estonia**

**Heiki Valk, University of Tartu, Estonia**

Setomaa district lies in the south-easternmost corner of Estonia. Historically it has been an Orthodox region with a mixed Seto and Russian population. Although Setomaa was a part of Russia until 1920 (and is mostly again since 1944), its native Seto population is of south Estonian (Finnic) origin. Due to a peripheral location, in the perspectives of both Lutheran Estonia and Orthodox Russia, the Seto culture has preserved several archaic features, many of which are of pre-Christian origin. The Seto sacred springs are mostly used for healing. In distinction from those of Orthodox Russia, the local sites of Setomaa have not acquired Christian meanings and superstructures (such as chapels, shrines, or the names of Saints). This has happened, however, to some central sites (as with a sacred well in the courtyard of the Pechory monastery, and the Slovensk healing springs in Izborsk) which have turned into famous, permanently visited pilgrimage destinations. On the contrary, healing at St John’s creek and stone in Miikse on Midsummer day (Julian calendar) has retained a non-Christian character. Some lakes of Setomaa were regarded as inhabited by dangerous water-beings. In the tradition related to the sacred waters of Setomaa both the Orthodox Christian and native pre-Christian layers can be distinguished.

**9:30 – A Study of Water Features in the ‘Faith-based’ Landscape of Mughal Shahjahanabad, Delhi (1639-1857)**

**Iqtedar Alam and Cameron A. Petrie, University of Cambridge, England**

In South Asia, religion has played a significant role in governing water access and use. Investigating the water culture requires examining both the hydraulic tools and techniques used to draw and transport water from its source and the religious frameworks that host it. Shahjahanabad, the last capital of the Mughal Empire, is situated on the banks of the sacred River Yamuna in India. The numerous ponds, lakes, and tanks, as well as the tributaries of the river, are revered for their proximity to the Yamuna and hold an agency over the human surroundings. Furthermore, Shahjahan, the fifth Mughal emperor and the builder of Shahjahanabad, was an ardent practitioner of Islam. The laws and policies of the Mughal state were governed by Islamic sharia (law) and people of the faith were considered as environmental stewards to the water features. In light of these water-centric sacred attributes, the presentation will focus on a discussion of water features in the devout hydrological landscape of Shahjahanabad, with an emphasis on the role and function of water as both a tool of management and an imperial object.

**9:45 – Heathen Practice versus Islamic Religious Dominance: Medical and Ritual Rites of  
Osun Sacred Water Deity in Contemporary Ilorin History  
Onagun Rasheed, University of Ilorin, Nigeria**

Despite the annexation of Ilorin which falls within the northernmost boundary of the Yoruba geographical region, the influence of Fulani Islamic hegemony encountered difficulty in stripping the people of their age long heathen religion, healing and cultural practices. Apart from the fact that the Ilorin Emirate became guided by Islamic religion, principles and laws, most peoples' healing and spiritual lifestyles continued to be shaped by heathen practices. These enduring practices are evidenced in the Ilorin Emirate's contemporary history through the survival of sacred worship sites and the steadfastness of adherents of the sacred water deities Ogun, Sango, Sanponna and Osun. The study explores historical data and analyses to examine the extent through which Osun sacred water worshippers perpetuated the survival of traditional deity worship in the face of Islamic religion dominance and supremacy. The paper employs a purposive sampling technique and focus group discussion in gathering valuable oral information with regards to the role played by healing and rituals rites in the survival of Osun sacred water deity.

**10:00 – The Power of Water: Some Practical Aspects of Charming in Lithuania  
Daiva Vaitkevičienė, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Lithuania**

Spring, river or well water was one of the most common means used by charmers in Lithuania to cure people. The sick person had to wash or drink the charmed water. In this presentation, the author analyses the techniques of charming rituals used to turn ordinary water into a healing substance. For example, when charming against evil eyes, water was poured on the corners of a table or on knives stacked on top of one another. For the treatment of panaritium (purulent inflammation of fingers), healers used ears of rye, through which water was poured over the wound. It was not only professional charmers who could charm water. In special cases, sick persons could do it themselves. After glimpsing the new moon, the sick had to stop immediately and ask someone to bring them water; then they had to say a special prayer while looking at the moon and wash themselves with water. The sick person could also go to a spring

or swamp, say a verbal charm, offer a coin and/or throw an object symbolising the illness into the water.

#### **10:15 – The Politics of Sacred Springs**

**Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, University of Kentucky, U.S.**

In October 2015, a cathedral dedicated to the Russian New Martyrs and Confessors was consecrated in Lozhok, a small town approximately 50 kilometers to the east of Novosibirsk. The consecration was the culmination of 9 years of construction on the cathedral, which is located near a holy spring on a former Stalin-era prison camp. The spring, credited with healing miracles, is considered sacred precisely because of its connection to camp victims. The consecration was presided over by two metropolitans (one from Belarus), three bishops from the Novosibirsk and Iskitim dioceses, and an American representative from San Francisco. This paper will examine the intersection of the political and religious events that served as the backdrop for the consecration and the symbolic roles of the international figures prominent in the event. An examination of these factors will elucidate both the socio-cultural role that this spring plays in this region as well as how it reflects the politics of Putin's Russia after the Crimea annexation of 2014 and the ongoing Ukrainian war.

#### **10:30 – 10:40 Session 7 Q & A**

**\*\*10:45 – 11:00 Tea/Coffee Break\*\***

#### **Session 8: Patron Powers, Local Traditions and Site Evolution**

##### **11:00 – The sacred spring of Jasna Górká, Poland, in local tradition**

**Bożena Gierek and Izabela Sołjan, Jagiellonian University, Poland**

In Poland, sacred springs are associated with the cult of saints, especially with Marian devotion. The rituals are fully Christian. It is impossible to trace their pre-Christian history. There are no written sources. One can try to look for some old beliefs in legends and tales. Looking at the pilgrimage movement in Poland—in the official narrative—one can get an impression that sacred springs are not that important as, for example, the cult of the images of Our Lady. Written information on the rituals performed at springs is scarce. However, the persistence in visiting them on any day during the year and believing in the healing properties of their waters prove their importance for pilgrims, especially for residents near each site. In order to acquire information on tradition surrounding a certain sacred source it is essential to conduct field work. In our paper, we would like to concentrate on a local site with a long tradition—the sacred spring at Jasna Górká in the Beskidy mountains of southern Poland, and to present the rituals performed there along with their meaning for the pilgrims. We will base our paper on available written sources and on-site interviews with pilgrims.

##### **11:15 – A Christian 'Celtic' Holy Well on the Shore of the Sea of Galilee**

**Michal Artzy and Jennifer Munro, University of Haifa, Israel**

The Kursi Beach excavation site and Monastery on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee dates to the Byzantine and Early Arab period. It is believed to be the site of Jesus's 'Miracle of the Swine'. Excavation revealed a structured stone lined 'well'. Over a hundred coins dated to the

period, and a few lead objects, thought at first to be fishing weights (defixiones?), were found in it. The paper considers whether it was first a fish pool that eventually became a 'holy well' for European pilgrims from 'Celtic' areas. The structure received water from the lake and from a spring. C 14 and analysis of short living elements during the period dated the level of the 6-8th c CE. A synagogue, dated to the same period as the Monastery's hostel, was excavated by the site. A marble inscription bearing a dedication in Hebrew/Aramaic, likely in secondary use, and a mosaic floor with apotropaic motifs similar to the those of the monastery were found at the water enclosure. As no Jewish village was noted nearby, the pool superstructure was likely constructed for the pilgrims as a reminiscence of Jesus.

**11:30 – Thinking Out St Gobnait: an exploration of the cult and continued relevance of St Gobnait in Ballyvourney, West Cork**

**Amanda Clarke, Independent Scholar, Ireland**

This paper will begin by outlining St Gobnait's peregrination from Inis Oirr on the Aran Islands through Munster as, following the revelation of an angel, she sets out on a quest for the place of her resurrection, identified by the sighting of nine white deer. I will investigate how her route can be hypothesised via holy wells, place names and sacred stones. I will continue by examining the foundation of her subsequent ecclesiastical settlement in Ballyvourney and its development as a place of healing, presenting accounts via historical records, events and folklore. I will explore the modern-day cult that still surrounds the saint. By outlining the turas, or pilgrimage, I will discuss associated rituals and artefacts including the shrine, the "bulla," the Sheela na gig and the holy well. Reference will be made to the characteristics of water of the holy well and its continued reputation for healing. The pattern day, 11 February, will be described including the presentation of a 13<sup>th</sup>-century statue and the associated ritual blessings of St Gobnait's Measures (ribbons). The paper will conclude with a summary of the continued importance of the saint to the community in Ballyvourney and beyond.

**11:45 – Fluid Spaces: Evolving Ritual Practices at Munloch Cloutie Well**

**Scarlette-Electra LeBlanc, Leverhulme Centre for Water Cultures, University of Hull, England**

This paper examines the tensions surrounding the cloutie tradition, using the active Munloch Cloutie Well in Scotland as a case study. In 2022, the Munloch Cloutie Well, a recorded site of healing since the 1740s, hit the headlines, after all of its clouties (cloths and votives) were removed without permission from either the land managers or the local community. My paper begins by exploring Walter Gregor's description of the cloutie ritual in *Notes of the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland* (1881) in the context of "sympathetic magic". I then examine the modern history of the Munloch site and its rise in fame and infamy as the number of deposited items increased, before focusing on the 2022 incident. Using tourist reviews of the site, I analyse the change in visitors' responses to the well as a result of the clouties being removed; while before, many reviewers complained of the mess, now multiple reviewers dismiss the site as largely empty and not worth seeing. I also explore the friction between visitors who are spontaneously moved to leave offerings at the site, and the land managers, whose website urges people to plan ahead and leave only biodegradable clouties.

**12:00 – 12:10 Session 8 Q & A**

**\*\*12:15 to 1:15 Hot Buffet Lunch\*\***

Those with a light blue dot on your name tags are registered for all lunches. Non-presenters with a day ticket including lunch have a tan (beige) dot on your name tags.

**Session 9: Community Engagement in Holy Well Projects**

**1:15- Changing Wells: How Restoration of Holy Well Sites Reveals their Communities'  
Shifting Concerns and Identities**

**James Rattue, Independent Scholar, England**

If we love wells for their antiquity and numinous qualities, so have others over time, but their attitudes towards them may not have been quite the same as ours. Well sites and structures have been deliberately restored, reconstructed and rebuilt by those interested in them for at least two centuries; examples show how such projects express a variety of different concerns, antiquarian, religious, and, ultimately, about the nature of the communities that host them. This paper concentrates on Cornish sites, but there is some illustrative material from other English counties.

**1:30 – If a Holy Well Could Speak: Community Projects to Keep Wellsprings Alive**

**Phil Cope, Independent Scholar, Wales**

This presentation considers new approaches to the development of accessible, sympathetic and sustainable futures for our often-neglected wellspring sites through a range of community, creative, spiritual, archaeological and educational activities I have been centrally involved in a number of important public projects to re-imagine the place of our wellspring sites within our communities. To date, these have included major Welsh initiatives in and for Penrhys in the Rhondda Valleys (based around Ffynnon Fair / Mary's Well, and the Pererinion Penrhys / Penrhys Pilgrims Festival), Margam Park in Neath Port Talbot (Ffynnon Fair, Capel Mair / Mary's Chapel, and seven other local wells), Llangrannog in Ceredigion (St Crannog's Well), and Laleston in Bridgend (Laleston Village Well). This paper details both successes and challenges working in partnership with local communities, councils, schools and heritage bodies, and explores the principal lessons learned. While some of our wellspring sites are still visible, and (though much less-commonly) in daily use, many of these 'living' wells are, in fact, dead. This presentation explores ways in which groups across Wales and beyond have responded to wellspring neglect by creating important new landmarks for community engagements and pride—structures and activities which are as alive as the water they contain.

**1:45 – The Answers Lie at the Source: an Analysis of Ibiza's Modern Cultural and Ecological  
Crises via the Lens of its Ancient 'Water Cult'**

**Joanna Hruby, Independent Scholar, Ibiza, Spain**

This paper brings together mythology, folklore, anthropology, history and ecology to analyse the Spanish island of Ibiza via the ancient spiritual practices and culture linked to its freshwater wells. The study brings together my ongoing research and investigations as the creator of The Wells of Tanit, a podcast recorded beside Ibiza's wells. I will contrast the modern challenges faced by Ibiza – as an acutely globalised mass tourism destination, facing not only the ecological threat of a severe water crisis but also layers of accumulated cultural damage – with

the immensely rich folklore, mythology and cultural heritage associated with the island's inland wells, and their relationship with the Carthaginian moon goddess Tanit. I will show that Ibiza's ancient wells provide remarkable clues as to how balance might be returned to the island's wounded cultural and rural landscapes, and will use Ibiza as a case study to demonstrate the vital role played by ancient myth and folklore in ecological restoration.

### **2:00 – Exploring the Concept of Place through Healing Wells in the Hebrides**

**Jessica Wood, University of Aberdeen, Scotland**

In a public engagement event titled 'Healing Well' on the island of North Uist in June 2023, event organisers together with members of the public sought to uncover the healing links between humans and non-humans in the landscape. This was explored through the use of an interactive display of items associated with folklore healing practices including local flora, fauna and water extracted from healing wells. Information relating to their medicinal uses alongside English and Scottish Gaelic names were presented within the display. The event also included an interactive walk to a healing well during which pilgrimage traditions were reflected upon. The use of fieldnote methodology was encouraged within the walk which enabled participants to consider the various stimuli encountered. This paper will seek to reveal how collaborative methodologies respond to ideas around how to engage publics in the potential 'therapeutic landscape' and to question what we can learn from folk traditions to inform future relations with place and perceptions of health. The work thus examines how exploring the social relations of healing wells could support small coastal communities in the face of growing concerns created by the climate crisis.

### **2:15 – The Lost Wells of Galloway**

**Peter Hewitt, Folklore Museums Network, Scotland**

The Galloway Glens' community archaeology project, "Can You Dig It", set out to map and better understand lost holy wells in Galloway, considering how we relate to these historic features now and how this has changed over time. It is hard to think of a feature in our landscapes that has changed more in significance and prominence than our wells. In these modern times of mains water supply and scientific thought, we can see wells as mere pools of water, curiosities in our landscapes. In historic times though, these wells performed vital roles to human society. No settlement, whether permanent or seasonal, can exist without some form of access to water. As well as this most fundamental factor, wells were often attributed with health benefits and ritual practices. Some wells were felt to have significant holy connotations connections, even acting as gateways to our spiritual world. Still today, these wells can be most treasured sites to local residents. Wells and springs feature prominently in the folklore of Galloway as places of healing, spiritual communion, even a bit of skullduggery. They are important, but often neglected historical sites too -without continued use they can become overgrown and inaccessible, lost to memory and sometimes accidentally destroyed.

### **2:30 – Holy Wells of County Durham**

**David Petts, Durham University, England**

Holy wells or springs once formed an important part of the religious landscape of NE England. Some could be elaborate affairs with stone-built structures over them or carefully constructed



basins or pools, others could be little more than a muddy puddle where a spring or a source of water emerged from the ground. It is certainly possible that some sites may be of considerable antiquity, and we know that prehistoric societies venerated wells and springs. Today, there has also been a revival of interest in holy wells, particularly amongst those with an interest in 'New Age' beliefs and among neo-pagans. The use of ritual wells and springs is best known in the medieval and early modern period. Sites could be visited simply for good luck, others were reputed for their healing powers. Sometimes, the water was simply sipped or poured on the part of the body that needed healing; in other cases a small offering, such as a pin, might be left by the visitor. Using Ordnance Survey maps for an initial list of possible holy and healing wells, we next look for superstructural remains at the sites.

**2:45 – 2:55 Session 9 Q & A**

**\*\*3:00-3:15 Tea/Coffee Break\*\***

### **Session 10: Well Dressings and Buxton**

**3:15 – 'Get Well Wishes: Finding the Feminine and Healing the Self'**

**Abbie-Eve Valentine, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Wales**

In the resurgence of British folk customs, particularly in the practice of well-dressing, there lies a profound connection between ancient rituals and personal spirituality. This paper will explore potential correlations between seeking out age-old customs and the quest for spiritual and personal healing. Amidst a patriarchal and increasingly perilous world, are we, consciously or unconsciously, turning to these ancient practices to restore balance? By reclaiming the spirits of the well, long overshadowed by the dominance of Christianity, are we also reclaiming the feminine? Drawing from Jungian psychology, where water symbolises the feminine and the unconscious, this paper aims to explore if this revival shows an innate drive to heal our relationship with both the natural world and with ourselves through a symbol of the feminine. Through an examination of the resurgence of well-dressing and visitation, this paper seeks to consider the intricate interplay between folk customs, personal spirituality, and the collective unconscious in the pursuit of healing and restoration.

**3:30 – Digital Jenny: The Ongoing Folklore of Two Peak District Mermaid Pools**

**Andrew Fergus Wilson, University of Derby, England**

This paper will present a summary of historical accounts of the two Mermaid Pools in the Peak District National Park in England and an exploration of how they are understood and experienced by recent visitors. Although there is an existing literature on the ways in which pools feature in folklore traditions, it appears that there is no detailed scholarly discussion of these pools. Much work in the English tradition associates small freshwater pools such as these with Jenny Greenteeth and the Peak District pools are no exception. Found in the work of Katherine Briggs, earlier accounts of Jenny Greenteeth are available in *Folklore and Notes & Queries*; what the present paper seeks to do is to examine the continuities and discontinuities between these older records and current accounts. To this end, it will provide a survey of publicly shared discussion of the Peak District pools. In doing so it will present findings from a survey of posts on social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook) that give accounts

of visits to the pools; these vary from overt legend tripping to ‘uncanny’ encounters on country walks. It will be argued that these contribute to an ongoing re-enchantment of nature and the landscape.

### **3:45 – Derbyshire Well Dressings: Controversial Tableaux**

**Richard Bradley, Centre for Contemporary Legend, Sheffield Hallam University, England**

Well dressings are elaborate pictorial tableaux produced annually in the summer months using natural materials (chiefly flower petals) pressed into a large clay filled board which are then sited at local wells, springs and pumps as an offering of gratitude for the essential gift of water. The main area in which these creations are made is here in Derbyshire. Whilst the practice of well dressing may be viewed by the general public as a rather twee example of rustic folk art, local newspaper the *Buxton Advertiser* in 1870 described their own town’s wells dressing festival as ‘a Saturnalia kept up for the most sordid of purposes’; whilst a well dressing displayed in Buxton in 1908 almost incited a riot involving 2000 participants. This presentation will explore the surprising number of times that well dressings have generated controversy over the years – including a local vicar who managed to stamp out well dressings for almost a century on account of the drunken behaviour of his parishioners, the radical designs of the early 1960s tackling themes such as CND and anti-apartheid, and the royal ruckus generated by Chesterfield’s tribute to a late Princess which swiftly went viral for all the wrong reasons.

### **4:00 – Hidden Streams: Buxton’s Waters, their Folklore and Influence**

**Andrew Robinson, Sheffield Institute of Arts, England**

In his 84-page poem *De Mirabilibus Pecci*, (1636), the philosopher Thomas Hobbes described Seven Wonders of the High Peak rather unflatteringly as “Two fonts, two caves. One palace, mount and pit.” Water features in five of these wonders, two of which, St Anne’s Well and Poole’s Cavern, are in Buxton, at the time a small hamlet ignored by most maps and of little interest beyond its Roman well and nearby Hall. If the Seven Wonders provided first a pilgrimage route for young aristocrats and more recently a handy tourist itinerary for the ever-increasing travellers to the High Peak, Buxton’s sacred well and healing waters have been instrumental in both its establishment as a Spa Town and its growth and continuing survival as a tourist destination. This paper will explore Buxton’s celebrated well, springs and hidden streams and consider their important role in the development of the town. Using material from the author’s extensive archive of photographs and related ephemera we will travel underneath the Opera House and inside the unrestored Crescent and Mineral Baths before visiting the town’s wells and folklore associated with Buxton’s Waters.

### **4:15-4:25 Session 10 Q & A**

**4:30 – Group Visit (walking) to the Well Dressing in progress at St. John’s Church  
(exhibition and documentary also on site)**

<b>6PM</b>	<b>Two</b>	<b>Evening</b>	<b>Options included</b>	<b>in</b>	<b>the</b>	<b>Day</b>	<b>Ticket:</b>
<b>Tour of Georgian Buxton</b> (Approximately 60 minutes), Meet at St. Ann’s Well							
Paul Elliott, University of Derby, England							

**Writing about Water as Healing** (Approximately 60 minutes), Meet at St. Ann's Well  
Nichole Lariscy, University of Alabama at Birmingham, U.S.

**7:30 – A private dining room is reserved at the Old Hall Hotel for those who indicated interest in dinning together.**

All are welcome to join, but as the private venue holds only 25, an additional table will be made available in the main restaurant. This is not included in the registration fee.

**3 July Chatsworth Workshop 8:30 bus departure from The Crescent**

A morning workshop on models for holy well research, engaging public participation/citizen science, and site conservation. This workshop will ask us to consider ways we can translate our work for planners and policy makers to safe-guard these sites and their associated ecosystems. Led by Celeste Ray and Bas Verschuuren.

After a buffet lunch, a group tour of the historic house is on offer at 2PM. The day's ticket also includes the gardens. We will make a brief stop at the Well Dressing in the town of Bakewell and should return to the Crescent between 5:30 and 6PM.